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SUBJECT: NIZHNIY NOVGOROD: GOVERNMENT STRUCTURES SENSITIVE
TO CIVIC ACTIVISM

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. For reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The planned construction of a shopping center on the site of an unkempt park in Nizhniy Novgorod's industrial district and the political and civic response illustrates the difficulties opposition politicians and civic activists have in mounting effective protests against government power structures that perceive all activist attempts as political criticism. All agree that the shopping center will likely be built, with the timing of the construction dependent on the December Duma election. Dissatisfaction with local government behavior and a growing desire for a more responsive government, however, show an electorate beginning to tire of the status quo. But, the combination of a defensive government, an unresponsive public, and underdeveloped organizational skills has left civic activism in the Nizhniy Novgorod Region weak. End summary.

Local Government: Reclaiming or Destroying?

¶2. (SBU) In 2006, the Nizhniy Novgorod Region's Investment Council approved a USD 130 million project to build a shopping mall in "Dubki" Park, which is located in Nizhniy Novgorod's industrial district, where almost a third of the city's 1.5 million residents live. The reconstruction project was billed as a way of re-juvenating an area that had become dilapidated and unsafe for residents, especially at night when crime and drug dealing were more prevalent. Construction was scheduled to start at the beginning of 2007.

¶3. (SBU) Dubki, which features century old oak trees, is the district's only "green" area. The district houses blue-collar workers, many of whom are now under- or unemployed as Nizhniy's factories become obsolete, and is a strong Communist Party (KPRF) base. Nonetheless, the proposed mall is not viewed as a possible source of jobs for the district's residents. The KPRF immediately protested the decision, arguing that federally-mandated green space would be further, and dramatically, decreased and that cancer rates would increase.

¶4. (U) The Nizhniy Novgorod City Council (controlled by the United Russia party) responded by re-zoning the park in June 2007 so that it would no longer be subject to the federal requirements. In the face of continued opposition, Mayor Vadim Bulavinov promised that no construction would begin unless an expert study, due to take three to six months, endorsed the project. Bulavinov also claimed in the press that all the protest activity was being financed by "commercial interests" in the district who feared the competition that the mall would bring.

Weak Opposition and Activists

¶ 15. (C) In a June 28 meeting, KPRF Regional Duma Deputy Vladislav Yegorov told us of his frustration that, having let Dubki fall into disrepair, the city was now arguing that it was unfit for public use and the best solution would be to "reconstruct" it, even though this was not popularly supported. He doubted that construction could be stopped, but promised that the KPRF would not give up. A visibly distressed Yegorov told us that he had introduced amendments that would in future prevent such re-zoning.

¶ 16. (C) Just Russia (the second Kremlin party) representative Svetlana Chermina stated that Just Russia was also strongly against the construction, but conceded that since the party had only just held its first official meeting in May and was still registering members, it had not done anything to oppose the decision.

¶ 17. (C) Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Sociology Aleksandr Prudnik assured us that since United Russia Governor Valeriy Shantsev had already "spent" the money he had received for greenlighting the project, the mall would be built. Prudnik noted, however, that Shantsev intended to deliver over 50 percent of the region's vote to United Russia in the December Duma elections and would not want to risk a reaction at the polls which meant, Prudnik thought, that no construction would begin before 2008.

¶ 18. (C) Askhat Kayumov of Dront ecological group was the most upbeat about the chances of halting the construction. Dront is assisting in bringing legal action against the government and while Kayumov predicted a long process, he optimistically

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pointed out that there was a brownfield site nearby. Although not covered by the press, Kayumov told us that a handful of protesters had set up tents in the park a couple of weeks ago with the intent of physically blocking any construction efforts.

Uninterested Public

¶ 19. (SBU) The citizens of Nizhniy are complacent. Only about 200, mostly elderly, people showed up for a rally against the shopping center organized by the KPRF and held on World Environment Day in early June. Unscientific questioning of a few locals garnered the response that it was a "terrible" thing, but that the bureaucrats would do what they wanted anyway.

¶ 10. (C) According to Mikhail Yevdokimov of Yabloko and Sergey Vinogradov, an activist for orphans' rights, the "Dubki" story is typical. Civic activism entailed enforcing laws that government structures were ignoring, which Yevdokimov said, government officials perceived as an attack. Therefore, attracting funds for civic activism from the wealthy strata of Russian society remained very difficult, since the upper class did not want to antagonize those in power.

¶ 11. (C) United Civic Front's (Garry Kasparov's party) Nizhniy Novgorod and Ulyanovsk representatives Vladislav Lukin and Aleksandr Bragin agreed, noting that bureaucrats' personal interests had pervaded every sphere of life. Separately, the Nizhniy Novgorod permanent representative to the Russian Federation, Sergey Bukin, cited "a guy sitting in Siberia" (imprisoned oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovskiy) as a reason for the lack of reinvestment and philanthropic interest by the Nizhniy local business community. Lukin was inclined to give less weight to Khodorkovskiy's fate as a cautionary tale, saying most feared local, not Kremlin,

retaliation.

¶12. (C) The People's Democratic Union (Mikhail Kasyanov's party) youth representative Svetlana Sumina commented that the middle class harbors a deep distrust about how their donations might be used and, as a result, does not support such causes. Konstantin Baranovskiy, Chief Editor for Nizhniy's regional edition of the magazine Argument of the Week, believed that the middle class was simply not interested. It was more concerned with issues that directly affected its economic well-being. Baranovskiy predicted that when a politician who identifies and addresses those interests comes along, Russian political apathy will disappear. He criticized the current rush by most political parties to the left, telling us that pensions and affordable housing were of limited interest to Russia's working electorate.

Comment

¶13. (C) Civic activists and even opposition parties in Nizhniy Novgorod suffer the same difficulties as many Russian civil society organizations: they seem unable to transform themselves into sustainable organizations that appear relevant to the general public. Their ability to be effective is further hampered by a ruling party and a bureaucracy that often have their own personal agenda. The encouraging observation is that Nizhniy government structures are not oblivious to public opinion being felt at the polls in December and will consequently likely delay implementation of a major investment project for over a year. Nonetheless, as in much of Russia, civic activism is too weak at this point to demand accountability.

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